

“The Dwelling Place of God”

- Do you remember your first house?
 - The first place that was yours- maybe an apartment starting out.
 - I had one over the summer in college when I got my first “real job” as an intern at a tech company
 - My roommate and I thought we had officially arrived! We had our own place for the summer!
 - A few years later, we graduated college, got married, and bought our first starter home (not in that order)
 - And that feeling intensified- it was a small place, 1300 square feet, in a newly developed subdivision in Conway, Arkansas
 - We didn’t have a ton of space, but we didn’t need it
 - We didn’t have the friendliest of neighbors, but they pretty much kept to themselves
 - But it was ours... a place to dwell.
 - It was a place of safety, comfort, in a way it defined us as a new family unit
 - We still drive by there whenever we find ourselves in Conway- good memories
 - I thought a lot about that first house, and even the subsequent places we have called home, as I read our OT lesson today
 - King David is established as King- he is not perfect by any means
 - He has made some good decisions, some questionable ones, and we haven’t even read about Bathsheba yet
 - But for a kid who started out tending sheep, and then later thrust onto the throne by God’s prophet, he is doing ok
 - God had given David rest from his enemies, peace in the country
 - And a house in which to dwell, to settle, a place of rest, enjoyment, and a place that defined David even more as the King of the Israelites
 - And to David’s credit, he is thankful¹, he acknowledges that God has chosen him and blessed him through all of the ups and downs

¹ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper11b>

- So the action in the reading really starts out with David in some odd way wanting to return the favor
 - David consults the prophet Nathan and at first Nathan sees no problem with this
 - It is coming from a genuine place of gratitude, David's heart is in the right place, and Nathan gives God's blessing
 - And there is nothing wrong with building a temple- a place where you go with intentionality to worship and pray
 - Yet later that evening, God has some concerns and has a slightly different plan in mind
 - God says that David's son will build the temple, a dwelling place for the Lord
 - We know God is not angry or upset with David because God renews his promises on the spot
 - God has been with David from the beginning as a shepherd, now a prince over the people, and God will make David's name great
 - God even says that he will build David a house- not a physical dwelling as David already has one of those
 - But a royal house, a royal lineage²
 - But for God, there is a lot at stake when it comes to temples and divine dwelling places
 - The implications are far-reaching³... for instance, in the ancient world, Kings are almost seen as divine themselves
 - How does David building a temple for God change the dynamic?
 - If you remember back a few weeks ago, God is not too happy with this whole monarchy idea in the first place
 - God worries that the King, whoever that might be, will abuse the people
 - And perhaps begin to think of themselves as the ultimate authority over the people, instead of God⁴
 - You know the saying- power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely
 - More than this, until now God has been rather untethered.
 - The ark of the covenant traveled in a tent and could be moved where needed

² <http://www.montreal.anglican.org/comments/archive/bpr16m.shtml>

³ Marion Soards, ed., *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, After Pentecost 1, p 112-3

⁴ Marion Soards, ed., *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, After Pentecost 1, p 112-3

- There was no place God was not, or at least no place God could not be.
- There was little temptation of permanently associating God with a building and a location
- And then a little temptation in beginning to see some people close to God, and then others not so close to God
- Or even far away from God, or maybe even God's enemies...
- All because having a permanent address for God can tempt us to make some serious mistaken presumptions.
- Do you think that's what God was worried about? With a King, and with a temple?
- I think human beings have been doing this kind of thing for a long while now
 - Putting God in a little box, maybe even one at a physical location,
 - I remember back in Arkansas the parish where I was rector had just finished remodeling their narthex area
 - It went from a small, dark hallway with classrooms, to an open floor plan with big windows, natural light
 - We were so proud of it- lots of room for coffee time before and after the service
 - And it became so much easier for visitors to find the actual church
 - The bishop came to dedicate the new aren and I will never forget his sermon
 - Here we are, all happy about this beautiful new building and space for our church
 - And he spent most of his sermon reminding us that God does not dwell in a building
 - Especially not the one we had just built!
 - I tell you it was not the most exciting building dedication sermon... but of course we all needed to hear it
 - We are good at drawing lines in the sand and putting people on one side or another
 - Inside or outside of the temple, so to speak
 - Or in the narthex of St. Mark's in Jonesboro, Arkansas
- Well Solomon did build that temple after all, and it became associated with the monarchy, and became THE dwelling place of Yahweh
 - And many years later Paul write a letter to the Ephesians talking about circumcision and the uncircumcised
 - It is like Paul is channeling the prophet Nathan all over again

- Remember that being circumcised was a major rite of passage for Jewish males- and still is
- It created that national identity- much mine and Katy's little house in Conway it helped create a family
- Defined who was in and who was out.
- It made it easy to see who was within the temple walls, its protection, and of course God's grace
- And who was not.
- And the early Christian church was in a heated debate as to what to do with those who were on the outside of that establishment
- Paul teaches that these fractures in humanity are being healed, mended, and brought back together
- These two groups, once divided, have now had their dividing walls broken down
 - The wall of the temple, so to speak, being made permeable once again
- Now we are really good at this, perhaps one of our biggest faults as human beings
- Is the ease in which we can draw arbitrary lines around God and other people
- So I think God helped us out a little, gave us something to help us self-correct
- God finally did chose a dwelling place, and it was not a temple, it was not a house of cedar
- It wasn't even in nature untethered as before when the Israelites left Egypt and wandered through the desert
- God chose to dwell in none other than a human being named Jesus
- How great is that?
 - Now, no matter what we build, God is both in it, and outside of it
 - Because there are people both in it and outside of it
 - God dwells wherever there are people.
 - If we can truly believe that, then we can have our beautiful places of worship that help us experience and encounter God
 - But not be tempted to think they are the only places God dwells
 - We can build great buildings and structures, but never forget that it doesn't matter if you're inside or outside of them
 - Because God dwells in all people.
 - We can even draw lines on a map, but God will never be only on one side of it...
- As long as there are people, God dwells there too.

- This is a message for our time, is it not? And maybe for all of time.
 - God's hesitation on having a temple for fear it will become a tool to exclude- that God will somehow be caged in the minds of the people
 - The ancient Christians struggling over inclusivity around circumcision
 - And then Jesus himself going from place to place not drawing lines, but healing and loving everyone he met
 - So busy he didn't have time to eat
 - I'll leave you with this-
 - For the next week, whether on the TV, or facebook, or wherever
 - Start counting the number of times something tries to get you to create a grouping of in vs. out
 - us vs them
 - Try and count every time we are told or led to be convinced that making God dwell in a confined and exclusive space is the answer
 - And how many times we are told to be afraid of someone beyond a boundary somewhere.
 - Or as my systems theory teacher used to say- count how many times the TV tries to activate your amygdala, the fear center of your brain.
 - And then remember:
 - God was skeptical about dwelling in a temple, even for his beloved King David
 - The early church discovered that the old distinction of circumcision no longer limited the Holy Spirit
 - And Jesus himself came to dwell with us as a human being
 - Perhaps just to give us some tools to resist dehumanizing anyone else.
 - Where are the temple walls we have built? What do we often use as a replacement for the old circumcision test?
 - I admit it is a simple message this morning, one we have heard many times I imagine
 - But one that keeps on needing to be heard
 - The next time we encounter a person who is unlike us, different than us,
 - Look deep into their eyes, because that is where God has chosen to dwell.
 - They are the dwelling places of God.

Amen.